

**Interview with Mary Lipsey
conducted by Janet Tener for the
Providence District History Project Providence Perspective**

August 29, 2007

Janet: Good Morning it is August 29, 2007, and we are here in the conference room of Supervisor Linda Smyth of the Providence District of Fairfax County to conduct an oral history interview with Mary Lipsey who grew up in Providence District and has been a long time county resident. My name is Janet Tener I also am a resident of Providence District.

Good afternoon **Mary** would you like to start by telling us where you were born, what career path you followed and your educational background

Mary: Good morning. First of all I was born in Atlanta but when I was a year old, my dad who was deeply involved with and worked as a historian for the National Red Cross, was asked to transfer to Washington, DC. My family moved into Jefferson Village Apartments on Arlington Blvd. There were a lot of military and government people living there and it was the place to live at that time. I have vague memories of that event like playing in the sandbox and that is about it. I lived there until the age of four when we moved to a house on Jefferson Avenue.

I attended Pine Spring Elementary, Whittier, old Falls Church High and the new Falls Church High, which I will explain later. I was a homebody and attended Mary Washington College, 37 miles from here in Fredericksburg, VA. I became a teacher, met my husband and so on. I taught in Fairfax County as a history teacher for 30 years at Lake Braddock, which is my home away from home. I started the second year that Lake Braddock School opened.

Janet: What memories do you have of growing up on Jefferson Avenue?

Mary: A lot of them have to do with childhood entertainment. I was talking to my brother and we used to play outside until 10:00 pm because of the heat and no a/c. The portable TV use to be taken outside on the patio at night so we could stay outside. The Jefferson Village Fire

Department sponsored fireworks on the 4th of July at the park on Jefferson Avenue. I belonged to a softball league at the age of 10 and myself and a friend had to go to the park and practice. Before we left I remember seeing a bad storm warning and yet we left anyway. On the way to the park I remember seeing water going over the stream and we had not been rained on terribly but the storm came so fast it over ran the stream. We have flood control culverts now to protect us, but then the stream came up so rapidly and we did not know what to do at the age of 10. We started to go to a neighbor's. The first house we went to was empty but the second neighbor let us call my dad. My dad working for the Red Cross had waders and we were five or six blocks from the stream and came and picked us both up and carried us physically, back home. By the time we got back to the house the water was just preceding the home. The flood moved so fast that it was up to Marshall Street and we also saw a VW pass us being carried by the flood. This stream crossed Jefferson Avenue but I don't even know if it has a name.

I remember early TV. We had a small black and white TV and I remember all the children's TV shows, like Captain Kangaroo, and Pick Temple, the one thing I remember about that show is that if you went on the show, you could get on a horse and they would tell you that you could say hi to all your friends in 30 seconds. Another memory was that you could send off to a TV show and receive a plastic film in the mail that you could color and at a certain time you would put the film on the TV screen and draw along with the host of the show.

I also remember walking along the Jefferson Village area and going to a drug store for a 5 cent cherry coke. I remember getting a hamburger, coke and fries for 39 cents at the new McDonalds and for 49 cents you could get the cheeseburger. There was also a frozen custard place near Rt. 50 that we enjoyed.

The Thomas Jefferson Library at the time was located at Jefferson Village apartments where we had grown up. We would walk a mile, felt safe and we spent hours at the library. That was a summer treat. During the winter we would go to Greenway Blvd and the police would come and block off the streets for us and we would go sledding and be there all day. I have really fond memories of the area. On Sundays we would drive out to

Fairfax Circle and drive around. Loehman's Plaza was an airstrip at that time and we use to go and watch the planes land and take off. We basically were a family that entertained ourselves with the wonderful opportunities that were afforded to us.

Janet: Do you have any other sisters or brothers?

Mary: I have a brother 11 months and 1 day apart.

Janet: You mentioned that you went to Pine Springs Elementary School.

Mary: Yes and it is still there. I believed it was opened in 54. My brother attended in 55 and I did in 56. There was no Kindergarten at that time, only a paid one so neither of us attended. I remember the first time I attended Pine Springs I thought I was being left with a witch. The teacher had on a long black dress and big black clunky shoes, a bun and no smile. Scared me to death. She wound up to be lovely but frightened me at first.

When we were small we were told never to go near Melpar, which is now Esystems, located down by the beltway. We don't know why but we knew something was going on over there. To this day we don't know what went on but we use to be intrigued by it and made up all kinds of stories that included spies.

We also had May Day for a celebration. This was a very important dress up event and we all had an opportunity to wind a ribbon around the flagpole. What May Day means, we were never told but it meant a lot to us to be a part of it.

We had book rentals at that time, my parents had to pay \$8 and for two children that was a lot of money at that time. But it made us protect our books more.

Then I went off to Whittier an intermediate school. One thing I remember was once Mr. Scott, the principal called all these names over the intercom. My brother and I were among the names called and we did not understand until we went to the cafeteria and were told that all the honor roll students were being taken to Williamsburg. We went on a three-day field trip.

Janet: Was that your first trip away from home?

Mary: No I had attended church camp at Columbia Baptist previously.

Janet: Where did you attend school next?

Mary: I attended old Falls Church High on Cherry Street and Hillwood Ave in Falls Church and one memory I have is they had a mosaic tile Jaguar which was their mascot on the floor, there were no ropes around it but you knew to never walk on it. It is now on the wall at the new Falls Church High. I remember fire drills and we had to cross Hillwood Avenue to the football stadium, and Pep Rallies and we also had retired military teachers who we addressed by their military ranks.

After my junior year they took my intermediate school Whittier and added to it and it became the new Falls Church High and the old Falls Church High became Whittier. Since then they tore down the old Falls Church High. When I graduated the commencement was held at Constitution Hall, which still occurs, and that always impressed me.

Janet: How did you dress for graduation then?

Mary: We had white robes and the guys wore some green.

Janet: Is Falls Church High still in existence?

Mary: Yes, it is on Jaguar Drive and Arlington Blvd.

Janet: How big was your class?

Mary: About 250 students. We did have a lot more emphasis on technical skills and we were tracked a lot; there was also training for Vocational Education because all students could or did not want to go to college.

Janet: You were also in school during the cold war period. How did that affect your life, the community and how you lived?

Mary: My brother said I must have been more sensitive than he because I remember. We could not afford a bomb shelter but we did stock up on items that we would be able to use. My dad also sealed the basement windows because of the dangers of radiation.

I also remember in elementary school they sent home a letter that in the event of a nuclear attack we would all be loaded on buses and be taken out to Fairfax Circle, now that is not that much further away. The staff would wait ½ hour and after that we were on our own. The plan was my brother and I would find each other and my mother would leave work and come immediately to find us. Then we would give our dad one hour to find us. He worked next to the White House at that time. If he did not make it in one hour, we would start driving to Indiana where my grandparents were.

I will never forget watching John F. Kennedy speaking about the Cuban Missile Crises stating that if this event took place it could wipe out Washington, DC. I remember the very next day asking about my friend Beverly, who was not at school that day. Neighbors said the family left Washington that same day and did not return for the whole 13 days in October. We had practice for these air raid days and drills during the school day where we would go under the desk. We had Civil Defense, air raid sirens, etc., and it impressed me that this missile crisis was a possibility that could occur. Now I look back and realize that my father being able to reach us in one hour from DC was impossible, but at that time it was comforting.

Janet: What other historical events do you remember?

Mary: My dad was a historian and so we all grew up loving history. We saved all historical newspapers and magazines. The very first paper we have saved was the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth and FDR's death in 1945, which I still have. But the very first one I remember was when they brought a TV into our school and we watched Alan Shepard take off into space. I will never forget that. It was thrilling to think an American was going into outer space.

Another thing is that in the 1950's my dad had information that Khrushchev and Queen Elizabeth at separate times would be driving down Arlington

Blvd. towards Washington and he knew when their limos would be passing by so we would walk down Jefferson Avenue towards Arlington Blvd. I remember seeing the limos, not the people just the limos yet we found that exciting.

Janet: What else do you remember about that time?

Mary: I remember the Kennedy Assassination. I was in the 8th grade at Whittier towards the end of the day and I felt something strange going on. There were curtains pulled across the windows of the main office and I had never remembered seeing curtains before. Nothing was ever said until the bus driver told us.

The rest of the weekend we were glued to the TV. We went to church and came home, turned on the TV and I remember seeing the transfer of Oswald and I watched as Jack Ruby shot and killed Oswald. I shouted to my parents and they ran into the living room where it was replayed over and over. That made a big impression on me. Schools were closed on Monday and we stayed home and watched the funeral on TV.

Janet: What kind of shopping do you recall in the Providence District at that time?

Mary: The big thing was Seven Corners, but before it was built there were seven streets which intersected. There was Patrick Henry Drive, Arlington Blvd. and several other streets. So when Seven Corners Shopping Center was built it was an open-air shopping center and I remember Woolworth's, which was my favorite store. We had Woodward and Lothrop, Garfinckles and across the street was Lord and Taylor, outside of the shopping center, bridal shop (where I brought my wedding gown) and shoe stores. But we never actually went there on a regular basis and I don't know why. One time when I was sixteen my mother gave us one hour there at Christmas. Instead my mother worked at Sears so we shopped there a lot. But I do remember that they use to have a sign at Seven Corners that changed colors with the weather and it was impressionable so you could always tell when there was going to be a storm. Also the Blue Laws were in effect and so we did our practice driving on Sundays at the Seven Corners shopping center because it was empty. Of course Jelleff's was there and when it was

my mother's birthday my dad would always make us go there to buy her a dress.

Janet: What did the boys wear to school?

Mary: Docker like pants and white shirts with a collar, no tie and oxfords, penny loafers. Sneakers were for Saturdays. My mother was very good about making an impression about us going to school. Our parents instilled manners and taught us to be polite and to look people in the eye when speaking to them. We had a great childhood.

Janet: What are your fondest memories looking back?

Mary: Just how wonderfully beautiful and relaxing this area was. It was a suburb place and the lots were not very big but we used every inch of it. The kids were always outside playing and there were always neighborhood places to go to play baseball, kickball, etc. You could sit on the ground and watch the clouds. You never worried about safety, we walked everywhere and it was a safe and secure place. We rode bikes all over and put clothespins and paper on our spokes so it would make noise. I babysat for .25cents an hour. I worked at the S and H Green Stamp store (Sperry and Hutchinson Green Stamp Store) and checked to make sure that all the books were full. I made .50cents an hour and gas was .25cents a gallon and movies were .25cents. And I remember comparing everything to what I made an hour even though I did not have a car to put gas in. My parents were Clyde and Virginia Buckingham. My dad loved to do April fool's jokes. One day he left a note for me to call Mr. Lions and I thought it was for a babysitting job, but it was the zoo. We use to play card games also. It was a nice life.

Janet: You had the benefit of sharing this information with your students.

Mary: Yes, I explained how I grew up with no TV, a party line on our phone, no a/c. The kids are amazed. And, of course no computers. Of course some people would listen in on your telephone conversation, but we never did that.

Also, one of the things we use to do every year was when my dad use to take us to Woodward and Lothrop (Woodies) downtown at Christmas time to see the beautiful display. We did not travel a lot but use to go to Indiana in the summer. Another thing my brother asked me to mention was how our mother almost killed us, not really, but she could not understand the concept of merge when the Beltway was built. The idea of continuing onto a ramp was not within her realm. She eventually avoided the Beltway altogether.

I also remember that Fairfax Hospital was not around when I was small and we had to go to Children's Hospital to have my tonsils out. We use to go to Washington and then take the electric trolley to go to the hospital. My dad had an operation and was in a Washington hospital. Children were not allowed on the wards and my mother had to leave me in the lounge by myself. I was five years old. Times have changed.

Janet: Well this has been a great interview and I want to thank you along with Supervisor Smyth for your great contribution on the Providence District Perspective.